

## University of Groningen

**R. Cormack, Icons (Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA, 2007)**

Hellemans, Babette Sophie

*Published in:*  
The Journal of Religion

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2009

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Hellemans, B. S. (2009). R. Cormack, Icons (Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA, 2007). *The Journal of Religion*, 89(2), 291-293.

### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Icons by Robin Cormack,

Review by: Babette Hellemans

Source: *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (April 2009), pp. 291-293

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/598600>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Religion*

roduces a further opposition between universalist modernists (e.g., Max Müller) and nationalist neotraditionalists (among whom he counts Richard Wagner and to some extent the Durkheimians). Chapter 4 follows these scholarly trends as they developed in Nazi research on “Aryan” race and religion. Of particular interest in this chapter is the demonstration that under Nazism these opposed research orientations were firmly linked to the party’s “position in between bourgeois conservatism and revolutionary activism” (179). The final chapter discusses the voices that were raised against Nazi research. The names covered range from Father Wilhelm Schmidt to Marija Gimbutas, via Georges Dumézil. But with these scholars, we are once again faced with ideologically informed constructions disguised as scholarly inquiries, which in the case of the two men are shown to be connected to their fascist leanings. Yet, it should be noted that the book ends on a hopeful note.

Arvidsson can finally point to a major shift in Indo-European studies with the rise of critical, nonconstructive research, exemplified by Bruce Lincoln. With *Aryan Idols*, Arvidsson provides a very important text for the history of religions and associated disciplines, both in terms of the wealth of information and analytical quality. His access to German, French, Scandinavian, and English sources insures if not exhaustiveness at least a very clear and detailed picture of two centuries’ worth of research. In so doing, he reveals the complex relationship among the scholarship, mythology, and ideologies that contributed to the creation of the Indo-Europeans. At the same time, the text functions as a critical history of the history of religions. Their founding fathers, methods, and paradigms are frequently the same, and questions about the pertinence and agendas of the one apply to the other. In his discussion of Nazi research, Arvidsson shows that it rested on particular visions of myth—for example, that it was a structuring expression of immutable order, which are disturbingly close to those propounded by such historians of religions as Mircea Eliade (226–32). That the consequences were so horrific in the case of Indo-European scholarship should alert us to the pressing need for critical scholarship in all areas of the history of religions.

*Aryan Idols* thus also reads as a plea in favor of uncompromising and critical history as the central method of the history of religions. Consequently, this book should not only interest scholars working on Indo-European religions but should also be required reading as long as authors such as Max Müller or Georges Dumézil are taught uncritically. Finally, the book’s graceful prose is well served by Sonia Wichmann’s excellent translation as well as by the numerous illustrations; a case in point would be figure 13’s French *bande dessinée* characters—Asterix and Obelix—illustrating the ideological use of “national antiquities.”

NICOLAS MEYLAN, *University of Chicago*.

CORMACK, ROBIN. *Icons*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. 144 pp. \$22.95 (cloth).

This is no ordinary book about Byzantine icons. One of its greatest specialists, Robin Cormack, brings both clarity and a wide scope to his description of icons by avoiding a technical narrative. In the five chapters, illustrated with lavishly published full-colored reproductions, Cormack describes the genesis, the nature, and the making of icons. The fifth and final chapter is entitled “Icons

## The Journal of Religion

after Byzantium,” in which the Russian icons are discussed. The last chapter is followed by a three-page epilogue examining quite a number of icons in the British Museum collection. In the overview the author brings depth to his account of what is specifically of interest about icons in art history. As with any good exposition, we do not lose our curiosity by being told what will be discussed next: we want to understand more about this complicated phenomenon in Christianity. Cormack manages to preserve an underlying thematic flow as he elaborates on complicated issues at an even pace.

The running text doesn't discuss academic debates, and no references are to be found: this book is obviously presented in the guise of a museum catalog. Since a preface or introduction is lacking, the puzzled reader has to find out by reading the acknowledgments placed at the very end that he is basically dealing with a specific work on the collection of icons at the British Museum. A short introduction about the approach of this project or just a subtitle would have been helpful. The reader who wants to learn more might have a look at the bibliography. Here we discover, not always in a consistent way, which pages of a specific study have been consulted by Cormack, although the works are organized by chapter and by name of the author, which makes it impossible to find out precisely what information Cormack has found in which book. Our hungry reader has to find his relief by running through a potpourri of highly specialized articles (often by Courtauld scholars), some of them written in the 1920s, glossy catalogs of the Getty and the British Museum, as well as progressive studies in art theory, such as the work of Hans Belting or John Hyman.

A scientific estimation of the work is therefore a difficult task. Those who expect the state of the art on icons from one of the most prominent scholars might be slightly disappointed, although the author should not necessarily be blamed for this. It is difficult to picture the intended reader that the collaborators had in mind in this highbrow project. A leading academic publisher, together with the most famous British museum (the book is British Museum trustees copyrighted) and a scholar of repute are involved, rendering somehow ambiguous the concessions made in order to create a work that is fancier and less overwhelming because of its academic weight. One indeed supposes that the project as a whole is intended to reach laymen. This makes the book interesting from a marketing point of view, since the problem at issue is rooted in the actual management policy of museums all over the world trying to attract visitors by competing with more popular forms of entertainment. As a result, museums are reducing permanent curators' positions in order to create temporary projects on a specific theme, asking “the expert in the field” to write an accessible book. Does the prestigious Harvard University Press want to show that it is trying to spread its wings, flying to different fields of knowledge and “edutainment,” outside the area of “pure science”?

In the book Cormack traces the evolution and development of the Orthodox icons and their influence on art history. This idea of the icon, what Cormack calls “the paintings on wood panels made for public use and for private devotion and prayers at home” (8), was formed as one part of a much larger theological agenda of self-definition and understanding in Christian religion. During the first centuries of Christian art, images referring to an invisible world such as the imagery of pagan gods could be seen everywhere in the ancient Mediterranean area. Shaping Christian art can be described as a permanent struggle between iconoclasts and iconophiles. Cormack contends that to understand this controversy we should simply refer to the famous beginning

of the Gospel of St. John and the Letter to the Colossians (cf. the “word made flesh” and “Christ who is the image [icon] of the unseen God”) without attempting to place these biblical quotes within their broader theological, historical, and sociopolitical context. Realizing that the dogma of Christ’s nature is of the uttermost importance and complexity in the history of Christianity, a more profound discussion on some of its theological aspects would have been helpful in order to frame the issue of incarnation as a very specific feature of Christian faith. In addition, this demands a more elaborated and actual discussion on seeing the unseen, especially when dealing with icons, as well as the influence of Byzantine icons on the art of the Latin church.

At the end of the book there is a kind of explosion of small pictures representing the important collection of Russian icons of the British Museum. Clearly, these are not the kind of icons with which Cormack feels the most at ease. Cormack offers lucid prose within parameters logically provided by both a geographical and a temporal restriction: the Mediterranean civilizations in early Christianity and the Middle Ages. There is no doubt about Cormack’s familiarity with the subject. If he does not delve into historical and theological controversies, it is probably for reasons already discussed. Reading the first four chapters and glancing at the reproductions accompanying the narrative, Cormack offers the images a context of unequal soundness. He aims to explain the complicated issue of the making of icons, and given that the author presents an *ouvrage de vulgarisation* and not a work of original scholarship, he makes a useful contribution to our understanding of icons as an interesting phenomenon in Christianity and, last but not least, as a sophisticated artistic enterprise. BABETTE HELLEMANS, *Utrecht University*.

MAKEHAM, JOHN. *Lost Soul: “Confucianism” in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monographs 64. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. xii+397 pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

Invoking one of the prominent New Confucians (while there are still ongoing discussions of who are to be considered proper New Confucians)—Yu Yingshi’s employment of the image of the wandering spirit or disembodied soul (*you-hun*) as a metaphor—John Makeham started a painstaking exploration of the journey undertaken by Chinese academics in looking for the return of the lost soul of *ruxue* (the learning of Confucianism or the Confucian learning) or “*rujia* culture” (Confucian culture). Makeham’s study aims to assess the achievements of “*ru*-focused intellectual enterprise” (6) by exploring how *ruxue* has been conceived and represented in academic discourse in mainland China and across the strait in Taiwan from the mid-1980s until the early years of the new millennium, to identify what aspects of putative *ru* (Confucian) thought and values Chinese scholars find viable and why they find them so, then to highlight the dynamics involved in the ongoing process of “intellectual-cross fertilization” (6) between academics in China and Taiwan made possible by the shared discourse of *ruxue*, and to examine the relationship between the discourse on *ruxue* and resurgent cultural nationalism in “cultural China.”

For Makeham, Chinese academics, while putting in time and effort looking for a corpse to enable the soul of *ruxue* to return, did not entertain the possibility that discourse itself might provide the requisite host for the return of the soul; that discourse is, in fact, a type of practice. It is exactly, however, the